

Introduction by Pierre de Nolhac.

THE
FOUR SEASONS

BY
François Boucher



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FOR
MADAME DE POMPADOUR



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1906

"THE FOUR SEASONS"

PAINTINGS BY FRANÇOIS BOUCHER



THE *Four Seasons*, by François Boucher, the property of the late Mrs. Ridgway, are among the most interesting series of designs by that artist. Comparatively small as they are—they measure only 56 centimètres in height by 72 in width—they represent Boucher's talent under various aspects: pastoral scenes, nymphs, and scenes of polite society; and as they are of his best period, we may profitably study these very pleasing works.

Their history and pedigree are fairly complete, as sometimes happens with important works of that period. They are dated 1755, and were originally intended to be placed above the doors of a moderately large salon, as it would seem, in one of the residences of Madame de Pompadour. The contemporary engravings by Daullé, dedicated to '*Madame la Marquise de Pompadour, dame du Palais de la Reine*,' each bear an inscription to the effect that the original pictures belonged to Madame de Pompadour. They are not, however, mentioned in the inventory of the lady's pictures made out at her death, which I have been enabled to publish.

They were perhaps previously withdrawn by her brother, M. de Marigny, who was also their owner, and in 1782 they are included in the catalogue of pictures sold after his death. In spite of the waning popularity of Boucher after that artist's death, they fetched at this sale 1,402 *livres*. It is more than likely that the Marquise herself ordered them of Boucher; she was in frequent communication with him.

In the catalogue of the sale of the Marquis de Ménars (Marigny) they were thus described: "The Seasons, in four pictures, forming a set. The subjects are known from Daullé's engravings. Two of them are pastoral: *Summer* is represented by women bathing, and *Winter* by a lady in a dress trimmed with fur, seated in a sleigh pushed by a Tartar. Canvas, 27 inches long by 20 high."

These pictures are still known by the names given to them by Daullé on his famous prints: the *Charms of Spring*; the *Pleasures of Summer*, which recalls an interesting anecdote; the *Delights of Autumn* and the *Sports of Winter*. If we examine them attentively we shall find all the master's characteristics.

The *Charms of Spring* is naturally pastoral; the most unreal shepherds are seen in the most impossible landscape. The canvas is crowded; not an inch of it is unoccupied, but everything holds its place. We feel that this exuberance is the outcome of the artist's imagination, but under restraint. The sky is blue, the trees pale in tone, a sort of powdery fragrance seems to be shed by the flowery branches on the loving pair.

The maiden is dainty and fair, and devoid of character; she reclines on the grass, leaning against her lover's knee, while he twists daisies into her tossed golden curls. The broad diffused light falls on the pretty girl in her yellow

dress, and plays on the sheeny folds of her skirt. The low bodice and short full sleeves show off the exquisite whiteness of her bosom and bare arms. A blue ribbon tied round her wrist holds a basket of roses, jessamine, and forget-me-not; the flowers that have fallen out form patches of tender colour against her bright-hued dress.

The youth, seated on the margin of a well, leans tenderly over the shepherdess; his loving hands are crowning her with flowers. His rather trivial profile is seen against a light transparent shade; a bunch of flowers is stuck into his crisp chestnut hair, and the colour of his dress is gradually subdued from his rose-coloured satin cloak and lilac coat to his white silk stockings.

Close by him, in the half shadow, flutters a blue scarf; a tambourine is seen as a patch of light. A goat is standing on a heap of flowers, its head only in the high light; another, lying down, seems to be bleating. To the right, a rosebud in bloom droops over the maiden's little feet. In the distance, against a bluish background of trees, we see a round tower and a bridge over a rolling stream.

Here all is artificial; faces seem to challenge nature; but what delightful light and colouring, what a tender charm of youth, spring, and gaiety! How we feel in every detail the mastery of the painter of pleasure, and how free still is the brush which so soon after waxed heavy!

Next comes *Summer*, with its caressing luminous atmosphere and the audacious grace of the three women bathing, nude, and white, and firm.

The landscape, again, is a scene of the artist's invention, quite delightfully impossible. The canvas is filled with a pleached alley of boughs, flooded with light; the rosy flesh is sheeny in the sunlight. Fleecy golden clouds float across a blue sky. To the right a large stone dolphin pours out from his yawning mouth the water that runs away in a cascade, and the dancing pool under the reeds invites the bathers. They are undressed, and their gay dresses—lilac, yellow, and white, brocaded with gold—hang on a flowering shrub.

The three women are grouped in a semicircle, following the line of the landscape. Our attention is irresistibly centred on the most charming, the best drawn, and the most lifelike of the three.

In fact this girl is a real person whose portrait was repeatedly introduced and painted *con amore* by Boucher. She was Murphy or Morphise, the first pensioner of the Parc aux Cerfs, who, at the age of fifteen, captured the fancy of Louis XV.

This was at the end of 1752, and Boucher, whose favourite model she was, is credited with having brought her beauty to the King's notice. She has been recognised in many paintings of that period, and M. E. Lassaigue has lately written her history in *L'Art*. A picture at Besançon, which he has very ingeniously identified, is the most certain study of Murphy from nature; and in the

Pleasures of Summer we see the same delicate features, the childlike mouth and little upturned nose. The black hair and dark eyes give her a look of mystery, while her ingenious expression gives them a puzzling and unexpectedly piquant effect.

We see her here sitting dreamily under a tree; she still has on her shift, but her shoulder is uncovered, and so are her round and shapely legs. We can see through the cambric the grace of her youthful figure; she is in full daylight, and as brilliant in effect as her companion who is lying nude by her side.

She too, perhaps, is Murphy stretched on a pale-coloured drapery, with one foot in the water. Still, the plump forms with rosy touches, the full development and lost profile, remind us rather of the Minerva in the *Judgment of Paris*. The third figure, less charming, is hidden, for that reason, perhaps, behind the reeds. The whole group is redolent of enjoyment, harmony, and brilliancy.

The *Delights of Autumn* offers no puzzle to unravel. There is the rich colouring of the season, splendid in a glow of light. Flowers and fruit on all sides—nature seems over-lavish; the trees are bent with massive foliage; the atmosphere is heavy, and blue like the horizon.

It would be an ordinary pastoral landscape but that the artist's bewitching brush has scattered over it broad touches of delight. It is softly soothing to the eye and mind, mildly emotional without a shock, the poetry of smiling rosy lips.

The fair slender girl is just like her many sisters, the bright children of Boucher's brain. She is not so much a personage as a delightful bit of ornament, a soulless white doll; but we cannot help loving her for being so unreal, so white, and so tiny.

Her white satin dress is full and sheeny; she holds up a lilac silk petticoat, and below it we see, like two little grey doves, her tiny shoes with bows of ribbon. The bodice is cut low, and her arms are bare below cambric puffed sleeves. A garland of pale roses hangs from the breast to her waist, and a tiny hat, edged with pink braid, is perched as if by magic on the left side of her head—a round insipid face, very pretty nevertheless.

The damsel is seated and leaning over the shoulder of a young man who kneels at her feet. He is pouring handfuls of grapes into her lap, large bunches making patches of purple and amber colour against her white dress. A basket tied with ribbons is on the ground, full to the brim with ripe fruit. By the side of the lily-maiden the youth is a stalwart figure; he gazes at her with ravished eyes. He wears a red coat, blue breeches, and white stockings. The large felt hat which covered his curling locks is lying on the ground.

The background is the blue sky; above the couple are the interlacing branches of two leaning trees. To the left are fallen trees overgrown with flowers, and beyond yet more trees. And the whole is in perfect harmony of colour with a quite startling vividness of light. Was not Boucher's highest ideal expressed in his landscapes?

Flowery *Spring* is over, the *Summer* too is gone, then came the joys of *Autumn*. Here at last is *Winter*, white with frost under a pallid sky. The light is exquisitely mellow and diffused, and the pretty lady sitting in her sleigh is like a sunbeam herself; she is driven on by a powerful skater.

The car is gilt, with the lines of a boat, and a swan at the prow. The lady is fair and ensconced among cushions of green velvet. A fur cap over her arms leaves her shoulders bare and sets off the pearly tones of the flesh; a narrow strip round her throat is tied with a Louis XV. bow like those worn on silk court suits, dainty, airy knots of ribbon. Her dress, very full, is of white satin, rather warmer in tone than the whiteness of the landscape, and she wears a large rose-coloured cloak.

Only her hands, it would seem, feel the cold; they are hidden in a velvet muff trimmed with fur. Her little feet, in the most charming *sabots*, are set on a footstool. The dainty head has no fear of the cold, for she has nothing on it but the rolls of her fair hair, powdered on the top and confined by strings of pearls and a blue ribbon fluttering in the wind.

Her gallant pushes the car with an easy swing. This is no servant, nor yet the "Tartar" of M. de Marigny's catalogue. This is a gentleman disporting himself like the fair one he is driving. He is warmly wrapped. A fur cap comes low down on his neck; a red cloak blazes vividly in the whiteness of the scene, falling over a blue coat. He wears white gloves, and his skates, fastened with silk ribbons, turn up sharply at the toes.

Everything is covered with downy snow; the earth, we feel, is alive under the dazzling sheet; fantastic icicles hang from the leafless boughs of the frosted trees, and the wheel of a deserted mill is motionless in the ice-bound stream.

The lover, meanwhile, bending over his lady-love, is murmuring sweet things in her ear, if we may judge from the white-robed fair one's expression of pleased attention. This is the keynote of this winter scene: Boucher could not but give it this touch of gallantry when representing one of the favourite and fashionable amusements of the eighteenth century.

These pictures of the Seasons, though a rather monotonous idea, lent themselves to the harmonious decoration of the elegantly carved rooms, never overloaded with magnificence, which were characteristic of the taste of Louis XV. They were frequently repeated. Lancret, in particular, had worked up these subjects with broader treatment, a more extensive landscape, and several figures. They were elegantly treated and full of pretty mannerisms; but Boucher was so far his superior in spirit and touch, and his palette was so much more refined.

He painted, again in 1753, the ceiling of the Council-room at Fontainebleau with panels of the *Four Seasons*, as a setting for the centre-piece, *The Sun chasing away Night*. *The Seasons* here were all children, lovely boys, plump and dimpled, sporting in the sunshine among clouds and on grass. But Boucher was essentially the painter of female grace, the colourist of woman's flesh, the dreamer of pleasure and inventor of fanciful love-scenes.

In such works as this we find the man as he was. At once meretricious and sincere, he firmly believed in the artificial spirit of his time, and his work may be called the realism of delusion, the truth of falsehood. And for the sake of the delight to our eyes we may well forgive him his unreality and conventionalism.

PIERRE DE NOLHAC.



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FRANÇOIS BOUCHER. — LES CHARMES DU PRINTEMPS.
De la Galerie de la Marquise de Pompadour.

Photo Braun, Clément & Cie



Photo Braun, Clément & Cie

FRANÇOIS BOUCHER. — LES PLAISIRS DE L'ÉTÉ.
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FRANÇOIS BOUCHER. — LES DÉLICES DE L'AUTOMNE.
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FRANÇOIS BOUCHER. — LES AMUSEMENTS DE L'HIVER.
De la Galerie de la Marquise de Pompadour.

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